

Reporters, 17, Knew They Had Big Story

By Lawrence Feinberg
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The two high school reporters had Cokes. Their source, "a highly placed government official," ate apple pie with cheese.

The setting, a corner booth framed by plate glass windows in Roberts Restaurant in Bethesda, was far different from the underground garages where "Deep Throat" spoke to Bob Woodward about Watergate.

But the two thought they were on to something big, though they say they didn't know how big. Yesterday, when an Associated Press dispatch based on their story was carried by newspapers around the country, they knew it.

The two reporters, Michael Gill and Richard Berke, disclosed in their story that high levels of radiation were first discovered in the U.S. ambassador's mansion in Moscow in 1959—17 years before the existence of the radiation there was made public.

Gill and Berke themselves are both 17 and seniors at Walt Whitman High School in Bethesda.

Their story, which is probably the finest example of

high school investigative journalism, appeared in Friday's edition of the school paper, "The Black and White."

"Sure we thought about Woodward and Bernstein while we were doing the story," Gill said yesterday. "Ricky (Berke) called me 'Woodchuck' and I called him 'Goldstein.' We were always comparing ourselves to them."

Berke said the two sometimes jokingly called themselves "Gillberke," a play on the "Woodstein" abbreviation of Woodward and Bernstein.

"But we never talked like that with anyone else around," Gill confided.

They still won't say much concerning their source, except about where they interviewed him. And they refuse to reveal his name, even though the Associated Press said their story was confirmed by two former Secret Service agents, James Golden and John Sherwood. According to AP, the two agents were in Moscow in 1959 during a visit by then Vice President Richard M.

Nixon, which is when the radiation was found.

"I won't say yes or no if it was one of the two agents," Gill said yesterday. "We promised to protect our source."

Berke said they made lots of calls to the State Department, trying to confirm the story, but the secretaries who answered the phone "just kind of laughed us off, until we came across this one source who told the whole story."

Berke said the original idea for the story came from Gill.

Gill said he had "talked about it in my family."

When a reporter asked him, Gill confirmed that he is related to Mamie Eisenhower. She's his great-aunt, he said.

Did Mrs. Eisenhower give him the tip?

"Good luck in trying to figure that out," Gill said.